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### **Review of Five Strands of Fictionality: The Institutional Construction of Contemporary American Fiction by Daniel Punday**

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Review

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*Five Strands of Fictionality: The Institutional Construction of Contemporary American Fiction* by Daniel Punday

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birth to a unique sort of double-consciousness—writers who anxiously brood over their status ‘as members of the dominant group’ while occupying a ‘subordinate’ position ‘in terms of their political sympathies’ (p. 3). This double-consciousness, in fact, is reflected in Hutchinson’s own attempt to articulate a ‘metafictional realism’ that can be used to characterize the social novel of the Reagan–Thatcher era. A sense of worldly pragmatism collides with the hyperreal, studiously pessimistic yet capable of recognizing small victories, which is matched in turn by a remade utopianism, ‘an invisible point of orientation’ which offers an oblique ‘riposte’ to an all-consuming culture industry (p. 178). Instead of straightforward chronicles of inertia and self-reflexive anguish, Hutchinson finds much richness in the ambivalence of these social fictions—interrogations of the fraught relationship between individual desire and the collective good; excursions into the strange border country between testimony and critique; the unravelling of libidinal masculinity; angry, unstable, but productive efforts to recover the ethico-political charge of narrative fiction. ‘I can’t go, I’ll go on’, as Beckett would have it.

Perhaps inevitably, given the sheer range of authors covered here, there are moments in the book where one might question the integrity of its critical architecture. In addition, the material on British fiction feels significantly fresher compared with the treatment of US writing. Pynchon, in particular, could conceivably be explored as a far more provocative and unsettling voice than Hutchinson suggests (although any scholarship on the underrated *Vineland* is most welcome) and the examples used to discuss DeLillo’s work are rather well worn. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this is a very fine contribution to our understanding of the postmodern and/or contemporary novel. Authentically scholarly yet accessible—and therefore of use to students and academics alike—this is a scrupulously even-handed and consistently insightful work that deserves to be read by many.

DURHAM UNIVERSITY

SAMUEL THOMAS

*Five Strands of Fictionality: The Institutional Construction of Contemporary American Fiction.* By DANIEL PUNDAY. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 2010. viii+240 pp. \$44.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1114-4.

Daniel Punday’s absorbing new book explores the role of ‘fictionality’ in contemporary American culture. It distances itself, however, from the idea that life in the United States is growing ever more ‘fictional’—suffused by media spectacles and ‘pseudo-events’ that intervene between individuals and real, authentic experiences. Such a diagnosis may be broadly accurate, Punday suggests, but to couch it in terms of fictionality is misconceived, for, as Frank Kermode argued, ‘fiction [. . .] is something we are always aware to be untrue’ (p. 4), whereas the crux of critiques of everyday life as fiction is that we can no longer discern the difference between the real and simulated, the true and the untrue. Punday is ‘interested not so much in the apparent shift in our sense of reality [. . .] as in the conventions and the institutions behind them that define the *discursive* uses of fiction. In other words, what is accomplished today by arguing about fictionality?’ (p. 3). Fictionality,

Punday argues, 'becomes in contemporary discourse [. . .] an occasion to rethink institutional and disciplinary boundaries' (p. 11). The question of fictionality emerges on the agenda when the legitimacy of new forms, genres, and knowledges is negotiated within American literary culture. 'Postmodernity', for Punday, names that period in which such debates assume a particular intensity and visibility.

Punday identifies five 'strands' of debate concerning fictionality. In his first chapter he sets out to offer 'a sort of archeology of the concept of postmodernism [. . .] which attempts to return to the motivations and intellectual backdrop that invigorated the early definitions of postmodernism' (p. 27). Focusing on the novelist John Barth, he identifies a paradox in which an alignment of fiction with myth—a form assumed to escape the occasional and contingent to embrace universal concerns—emerges precisely from very particular occasions within specific institutional settings: reviews, interviews, commissions, etc. Barth's (and by extension early postmodernism's) understanding of fictionality, that is, seeks to transcend the very institutional structures that make it possible. Chapter 2 brings together two figures who ostensibly share little more than initials: Alice Walker and Andy Warhol. As Punday skilfully shows, however, both employ the notion of fictionality to prise open and expand the literary and artistic institutions of which they are—and are not—a part. Each displaces a 'canon' of universally esteemed works by defining fiction as an 'archive' of artefacts (texts by marginalized writers; media-generated imagery) whose aesthetic status remains to be fought over. In Chapter 3 Punday considers the persistent idea of fiction as a lie, paying particular attention to those 'metafictional' authors who self-reflexively signal the illusory, invented, and inauthentic nature of their narratives. These writers, Punday suggests, 'parody traditional literary and publishing institutions without the impetus for reform [displayed by Walker and Warhol], but their work is nonetheless clearly "literary" because these institutions continue to provide the context in which their stories must be read' (p. 88). The fourth chapter turns to science fiction, specifically 'cyberpunk', as exemplified by William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984) and the Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix* (1999). The prevailing understanding of cyberpunk as a fictional form, Punday suggests, concerns not the extrapolation of the future 'in the traditional science fiction sense' (p. 138), but the subgenre's function as a 'symptom' of the present. The 'reading of texts [. . .] as symptomatic seems [. . .] to mark a dissolution of belief that a particular set of disciplinary techniques is necessary to understand and evaluate a text, and to position this definition of fiction on the tipping point between literary institutions and popular culture' (p. 146). The development of Punday's argument traces a progressive movement towards and beyond the margins of literature, culminating, in Chapter 5, in a discussion of role-playing games, whose fictionality is defined by a profusion of intertextual reference, but whose irreverent use of these sources self-consciously places the form outside the category of the literary. Chapter 6 shows how the five strands of fictionality previously identified interweave in the emerging field of electronic writing, which is in the process of carving out a space between two institutional definitions: literary text and game. Punday's tracing of his five strands offers intriguing and counter-intuitive results. In particu-

lar, his insistence on the 'institutional construction' of cultural forms often analysed as if they existed independently of such frameworks is salutary and insightful. Scholars of contemporary American literature will find much of value in this book.

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

PAUL CROSTHWAITE

*Chrétien Continued: A Study of the 'Conte du Graal' and its Verse Continuations.*

By MATILDA TOMARYN BRUCKNER. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009. xiii+263 pp.; 7 plates. £55. ISBN 978-0-19-955721-9.

Chrétien de Troyes's unfinished *Conte du Graal* is well known, but far less attention has been paid to the work of the various continuators who extended the narrative to several times its original length. Matilda Bruckner is therefore to be saluted for having produced the first book-length study of the corpus, and it is to be hoped that her work will spark new interest in the subject. Bruckner's central thesis is that the *Conte du Graal* Continuations are written under the extended 'authorship' of Chrétien, and she traces the ways in which themes and problems set up in the original text are revisited and reworked by the continuators. Her insistence on the unity and coherence of the corpus offers an important corrective to the commonly held view that the Continuations represent unfaithful and ultimately disappointing additions to Chrétien's text. Indeed, there is strong evidence, both from the manuscript tradition and from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century library inventories, that the majority of readers and audiences would have encountered Chrétien's contribution as one part of a larger, unified narrative involving some configuration of the Continuations.

Individual chapters focus on the heroes' sexuality, the reciprocal responsibilities and limits of the mother-son relationship, and the place and value of violence within Christian chivalric romance, themes which recur with insistence throughout the corpus. The questions posed by Bruckner of her material argue for the relevance of the *Conte du Graal* Continuations to the wider study of these themes in medieval literature. In order to facilitate this process and familiarize the reader with the texts, useful plot summaries of the Continuations are included in an appendix. The first and last chapters are more concerned with issues of authorship and narrative structure, vital to understanding a corpus whose production was the work of so many different hands, and which often seems more interested in the proliferation of open narrative than in its completion.

While Bruckner's study should help to raise the profile of the *Conte du Graal* Continuations in literary scholarship, it is a slight disappointment that she has largely structured her discussion of them around a hierarchical distinction between Chrétien's 'master text' and the responses of his successors, which is more a product of modern scholarship than of medieval textual transmission. In doing so, she downplays the extent to which the different Continuations impose *their* disparate agendas retroactively onto the material that they are continuing. The insights provided by this study might therefore usefully be supplemented by further work on the corpus which accepts the manuscripts' invitation to privilege the process of textual